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ABSTRACT

This study examined how existing literacy practices in native language and English affect the ways parents manage their own lives and support emergent literacy in their children. Participating in the study were non-English speaking parents of successive cohorts of children attending a preschool in Arlington, Virginia. Data collection methods included focus group and individual telephone interviews with parents (mostly mothers) regarding family literacy practices in Spanish and English. Findings revealed complex differences in literacy practices among and within families, with the typical family having mothers who had some literacy in their native language and fathers with at least minimal English literacy. Parents, especially mothers, were very aware of the consequences of their not having fluency in English, including power relations within families, ability to support children's literacy, mothers' employment opportunities, and ability to interact in the larger society. Some families support the developing literacy of their children in ways that schools may not recognize, such as reading to their children in another language. Mothers expressed the desire and intention to learn English, with a number registered for English classes offered through the preschool parent support program. (Contains 17 references.) (KB)

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HOME AND PRE-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS: MEETING IN THE CONTACT ZONE

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Abstract

This paper studies the literacy practices of families with children in a preschool for non-English speakers. The paper explores existing literacy practices (in native language and English) in the home and neighborhood context. Using data from focus group and individual interviews, we examine how existing practices affect the ways parents manage their own lives and support emergent literacy in English for their children. We find complex differences in literacy practices among and within families. Some families support the developing literacy of their children in ways that school may not recognize.

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HOME AND PRE-SCHOOL CONNECTIONS: MEETING IN THE CONTACT ZONE

THE PUZZLE

A TEACHER SAID

I would also assume that if I moved my family to another country because I thought the education there would benefit them I think I would also make an honest effort myself to learn the language with my children. So many people talk about students whose parents do not speak English at home and that presents a definite break down in communication between the school and that home. I would want to know how my student was doing in school not take his word that he is good.

–written by a Northern Virginia teacher in a web-based discussion of the impact of home culture on school performance (Quoted in DeMulder and Rigsby, 2001)

A PARENT SAID

. . .I have a lot of difficulties. I feel so incompetent and I feel so bad that I have to look each word in the dictionary. My daughter asks me many questions about how to write something, but because I can't tell how to do it I feel so bad. It's very difficult to write in English. I try and try, but I see writing in English as a mission impossible. My children need my help especially now that they are learning new things. How can I stimulate them in English when I don't even know how to write English? I don't consider myself to be an ignorant, but I do feel bad that I am unable to help my children with their homework and be there with them when they have questions about the English language. People in this country treat you as though you are an ignorant or an illiterate just because you don't know how to speak, read or write English. I know that I am very literate in my language but not in English. When I go to school meetings, teachers talk to you as though you don't know anything. They talk to you as though you are someone who is ignorant. That makes me very upset.

–translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

The first quote above is from a teacher who works in an elementary school in Northern Virginia. It represents a perspective the authors have heard voiced by a number of teachers in this area. The second quote is from the (non-English speaking) parent of a child who attends the Arlington Mill Preschool established by one of the authors to serve immigrant families in Arlington. This research grows out of the puzzle depicted above as we explore the reality of literacy practices among the families served by the preschool and try to understand the dilemmas they face as their children move into the public school system that expects them to have developed basic literacy in English.

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THE RESEARCH QUESTION: WHAT IS THE "TRUTH" ABOUT LITERACY PRACTICES AMONG THESE FAMILIES?

What literacy patterns and practices do immigrant families have? Do parents avoid learning English? Do they have literacy practices in their home language that form a basis for learning English and supporting the developing school literacy of their children? What are their experiences with literacy in their new home?

THEORY

We can define literacy in a particular domain as possessing the knowledge, practices, and values that allow one to operate within that domain in roles that are recognizable in the domain (Garnes, 1996). This definition opens up the likelihood that one can be literate to different degrees in different spheres. See Keller-Cohen (1994) for a nuanced discussion of dimensions of literacy definitions, including whether literacy is seen as normative (versus some deficit condition), binary (literate/illiterate), individual or social, limited to reading/writing/speaking practices, etc. Popular definitions often limit the meaning of literacy to whether one can read or write in the dominant language of the social context (Street & Street 1991, quoted in Hull and Schultz 2001). Using the definition above, we can define school literacy as the knowledge, practices, and values that allow one to operate within the school context in (assigned subservient or dominant) ways that are recognizable within the school community. We adopt a critical perspective in laying out this definition of school literacy. Street and Street (1991) point to the possibility that if this definition is behind one's understanding of literacy, persons who are not skilled in the reading/writing of the language of the school will be deemed to be not literate. This assumption is particularly a problem in communities in the United States where some or many of the families served by a school have limited knowledge of English but are literate in their native language.

In this paper we talk about and analyze two related phenomena when we use the terms literacy and literacy practices: 1) the facility with which people use their native language and English, taking literacy to be an individual phenomenon, and 2) the uses of literacy in the family and community, taking literacy to be a socially negotiated phenomenon. An example of the first use is to talk about the facility with which a person can read, write, speak, or hear with understanding any particular language. An example of the second use is to note for the group of parents with children in the preschool, how they learn the content of messages in English, including reading, using a dictionary, guessing in context, going to some regularly available resource person (neighbors or friends, the parent support staff at the preschool, their spouse, a church official were mentioned).

Where the culture of a school differs from the culture(s) of the families it serves and where family literacies are different from school literacies, we can define the contact zone–"where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power"(Pratt 1991, p. 34). The puzzle at the beginning of this paper depicts the contact zone between one family and the culture of their neighborhood school. The parent describes her

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anguish over interactions with the school staff and cultural expectations beyond the boundary of her own cultural community. Her community is one with many Spanish speaking immigrants from Central and South America. This community in South Arlington, a working class area suburban to Washington, D.C., is a community with a variety of Spanish-fluent institutions which give minimal support to its immigrant families. Some public schools are not among those Spanish-fluent institutions with the result that contacts between home and school are meaningfully characterized as transactions in the contact zone. Hull and Schultz (2001, p. 587), commenting on the Street and Street argue that " . . . there is a need to focus on the ethnographies of literacies more broadly and to document, as do these authors, the ways that school can impose a version of literacy on the outside world (Street and Street, 1991) "

In some ways the Arlington Mill community is a segregated language community. Linguists studying the literacy practices of **segregated language communities** emphasize the diversity of practices within communities as different parts of the community experience different degrees of interaction across the contact zone (Bizzell, 1982). Mainstream U.S. citizens often cannot distinguish people who do not have literacy in English from those who do not have literacy in any language. School staff sometimes generalize lack of literacy in English to complete lack of literacy and disengagement from care for one's children. Particularly among immigrant adults, the ability and resources for developing literacy in English are problematic. For some adults, existing skills and experiences provide a good foundation on which to scaffold the development of literacy in English. However, many immigrant adults have fewer resources on which to build English literacy. The availability of native language-fluent institutions and resources interacts with individual skills and resources in affecting whether immigrant adults develop literacy in English. Hull and Schultz (2001, p. 587) point to New Literacy Studies research which makes this point emphatically: "Rather than locating literacy solely within the lives of individuals, they emphasize the ways in which families and local communities regulate and are regulated by literacy practices (Barton, 1994; Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Clark & Ivanic, 1997)."

We are anxious to document the varied literacy practices within this immigrant community because we anticipate there are ways in which the preschool staff, with the cooperation and collaboration of members of the larger community, can scaffold emergent literacy onto existing literacy practices. Guerra argues (p. 5) that ". . . we still need to learn as much as we can about the actual lived experience of members of marginalized groups in the United States, especially those whose limited economic and educational options give them little choice but to make their homes in highly segregated racial and ethnic communities out of which some members rarely come."

METHODS

The parents (mostly mothers) of successive cohorts of children attending Arlington Mill Preschool have been interviewed in a focus group context to raise literacy and other educational issues. The focus group format was chosen as a way to begin data gathering as we established rapport with parents. As a group, parents are both shy about contacts with authority figures and reluctant to

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be in contexts where they are asked to speak in public. The focus groups were conducted in Spanish with 6-10 parents as part of a broader context of weekly meetings of parents at the preschool during the morning session. Our research with previous groups of parents has shown us that group discussions have served well to establish the trust necessary for more detailed one-on-one interviews.

The focus group asked general questions about how mothers cope with the literacy demands in their daily lives. Questions were simplified and translated by the Spanish-speaking interviewers, Ph.D. students in education or psychology. Questions on literacy asked:

- Under what circumstances do you have to read and write?
- What was the last written communication you had? Was it English or a different language? How did you manage the task of learning the content of the message?
- What was the last communication you had where you had to write? How did you manage the task of responding? What was the language?
- What is your most frequent task of literacy? What do you most often read or write?
- What kinds of written materials do you have in your home? Do you share them in your family?
- In what ways have literacy activities and literacy needs constrained or oppressed you?
- In what ways have literacy skills given you opportunities?
- What have you done to develop your own literacy? What were the results?
- What do you see as being the biggest impediment(s) to developing your own literacy?
- Give some examples of your own literacy using your native language.
- What would you do if you received an English language document from a government agency that you felt you had to respond to?
- How do you see yourselves helping your children learn English and your native language?

In addition to information collected in the focus groups, the bilingual interviewers talked with a number of the mothers in more detail about literacy practices. These one-on-one interviews were mostly done by telephone by the bilingual interviewers. The questions focused on the details of literacy practices and on immigration history.

In the analysis below, we provide data from both focus group and individual interviews to illustrate claims from our data. The few cases do not allow generalization beyond this population. Our aim is to document the kinds of variation in literacy patterns that exist in this complex and interesting population.

DATA ANALYSIS

We read through the various interviews looking for dominant themes and patterns. Focus group comments were separated by individual but also read in the context of the actual interview. The small size of the sample and the varied contexts of data gathering preclude any kind of variable-based analysis. What follows is one way of organizing the data around clusters of ideas.

CLAIM ONE. Patterns of literacy practices vary widely, even among the immigrant families served by the Arlington Mill Preschool. Virtually all the mothers have some literacy in their native language but few are literate in English. On the other hand, most of the fathers of the children are at least minimally literate in English. They work in the U. S. labor force and often have been in the U. S. longer than their wives. Thus, the contact zone not only exists between these families and the school system, it exists even within families. Between the families there are also great variations. One mother in the parent group is the holder of a master's degree from a South American university. Another holds a three year post secondary certificate in early childhood education. Other mothers are barely literate in their native language. Those who are not literate in English report often being treated as if they were illiterate in every respect. Finally, some members of the community are nominally bi-lingual, working in places where they have to use their limited English skills.

Perhaps the most extreme case of the contact zone within a family is a Laotian family with a child in the preschool. The father was educated in this country through high school so he speaks, reads, writes, and understands spoken English. On the other hand, he speaks and understands spoken Laotian, but he neither reads nor writes the language. The mother was educated in Laos through high school and reads, writes, and speaks Laotian. After immigrating to the U.S. she attended adult education classes and learned a little spoken English. She can read but cannot write English:

> He (husband) talks to me in Laotian. He can't read or write in Laotian, so if he has to write a message to me on a message board, he has to write it in English. You know, he doesn't know how to read and write in Laotian. I sometimes don't understand what he means in English, so he has to talk to me in Laotian. He knows how to speak Laotian very well, but cannot read or write it. . . . I always speak to my husband in Laotian. It is nice because I help him with his Laotian and he helps me with my English. . . . I read magazines in my language (Laotian). My children don't understand my language. It is very difficult for them to understand Laotian, that's why I only speak in English to them. I would like them to learn how to speak my language so that they can talk to my parents and my grandparents. . . . my mother is coming to the U.S. very shortly and my children are going to have to talk to her. (Parent literacy interview Jan. 2002, transcribed from tape of hesitantly spoken English.)

This quote illustrates both the diversity of language patterns within the family and the mother's clear understanding of the importance of language. All members of the family are learning English. Learning English has been much easier for the children than the mother. They have the support of the school structure to reinforce their learning. Because this mother is shy and uncertain of her use of English, she is reluctant to try to use English in public. As a consequence she is very likely to be viewed as illiterate by school authorities.

The parent whose quote opens the paper illustrates a different complexity in literacy pattern

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variations within families. She speaks below of the asymmetry in literacy between herself and her elementary-aged children.

> . . . I can read in English. I read books that are in English everyday. I read storybooks in both English and Spanish. I read them to my children. I believe that I am learning how to read in English, I know the silent letter. I am learning these letters because my children are teaching me how to read. Now writing is very hard for me . . . I do it once in a while when I have to help my children with their home work or when I am studying music.

So as with the Laotian mother and her children, with this Latina, there is a contact zone between herself and her children! Earlier, at the beginning of the interview, she made this confusing comment: "I am an illiterate in English because I don't speak, read, or write in English. I don't know anything in English." In speaking about her reading in Spanish this mother had the following insight: "I read books to inform myself, to entertain myself. . . .I like to read stuff by Sofia Serrano, Richard Vazques, Isabell Allende, authors from my country. All kinds of literature in Spanish and I also read books to study English, which are in English." How are we to understand this mother's literacy? She is engaged in self-study of English. She is highly literate in Spanish. Yet she describes herself as " . . . an illiterate in English . . . " In some sense, her lack of literacy in English is exacerbated by the fact that she has an elementary-aged child. She can read to her children in both Spanish and English. It is when she needs to help the older one with school assignments that she confronts her own limitations. One might speculate that her lack of literacy in English undermines her self-confidence and feelings of competence.

CLAIM TWO. Parents, especially the mothers, are very aware of the consequences of their not having fluency in English. These consequences manifest themselves in power relations within families, in the mother's ability to provide support for the literacy development of their children, in employment opportunities for mothers, and in their ability to interact in the larger society.

In response to a question about their most common literacy task or need, many of the mothers responded that communication with the preschool and with the elementary schools their older children attend was the primary circumstance under which they had to read and write. This literacy demand is exacerbated by the fact that for most of these women, their spouse typically carries the burden of handling literacy tasks where English is required. Further, for several, their husband worked long hours or multiple jobs, leaving little time for any role in childcare. One mother reported pressure from her husband to learn English while he refused to help with childcare:

> My husband only comes home on the weekends. When he is home, he wants me to take care of him. So when he tells me I need to take English classes, I ask him if he will take care of the kids while I am gone. Of course, he says he is too tired to take care of the children and he really does not know what to do with them when he is alone with them. Perhaps when they go to elementary school, I will have time during the day to take

classes.

–translated from Spanish by the Spanish speaking interviewer

In these families, wives bear the family responsibility for communication with the schools (that is they are available to go to the school and to receive messages from the school) while being less able than their less involved husbands to carry out those tasks. Five of six women in the most recent focus group explicitly mentioned their dependence on their husband for literacy transactions across the contact zone. The women understood and regretted their dependance on their husbands for communication. The contradictory pressures are well articulated by this mother:

> I am taking English classes at night. My husband works late every night, so I have to leave my daughters alone for two hours while I go to classes. I am always scared that something can go wrong while I am gone. My daughters know not to open the door to anyone or answer the telephone when I am not home. They can call my husband on the cellular phone if they are scared or need something. My husband told me that if anything happens to the girls it would be on my conscience not his. However, I need to learn English. I cannot live with the frustration of not being able to communicate with other people.
>
> My husband expects the house clean, the laundry done, and the dinner served when he comes home. If I had a job, he knows that I would not be able to keep up with the housework. I have to be honest, to be in the house every day is extremely boring. I would rather be working outside the home and earning extra money. My husband already told me that he would divorce me if I did not cook for him.
>
> –translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

A number of the mothers reported similar problems in relations with their husbands. Because the husbands have nominally acquired the "language of power" as they have worked outside the household, they are able to come and go more freely, to broker interactions across the contact zone, and to control their wives' access to resources and goods. The following quote illustrates the power of husbands:

> Not knowing English makes me depend on my husband too much. I don't want to depend on my husband that much. I want to feel independent. Let me give an example of how dependent I am of him when we go to the store: one day we were at the mall and I saw these really nice shoes. I really liked these shoes. Because there was no one there who could speak Spanish, I asked my husband to ask the sales person for my shoe size. My husband then said that he wouldn't ask the lady for my shoe size because he didn't like the shoes. Can you believe that! I got so mad because I really liked the shoes. I didn't get the courage to ask the lady for my size. Do you see how men are... if I knew English I wouldn't have to depend

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on my husband for those things. Men can be very mean sometimes.

This same mother, who is taking ESL classes offered to the parents through the support program run in connection with the preschool, commented on how her limited English affects her ability to interact with her children's school, her own ESL teacher, store clerks, and others working across the contact zone.

> Not knowing English limits you in a lot of ways. It limits me from going to grocery stores or stores where they only speak English. I feel that I can't communicate to others at the stores. If people ask me something, I can't respond to them. It limits my communication with others. Not knowing how to speak, read and write English limits me at my son's school. I can't communicate with the teacher unless I have a translator to translate for me. I am also not able to communicate with my English teacher. Of course I am there to learn, but I feel that I should know more than I do so that I would understand a little of what the teachers tell us. Not knowing English does not affect me in terms of work because I am not working yet. I plan to get a job when my youngest child is a little bit older. I hope that by that time I will know enough English to communicate with people at work.
>
> –translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

Another mother expressed frustration at having to depend on her husband for transportation and translating all interactions that occur in English.

> In January I wrote a letter to my cousin. I sent her pictures of my children because she doesn't know them. Writing letters in Spanish does not require for my husband to help. I can perfectly read and write in Spanish so I don't depend on him for this. Now if it is English that I have to write, I need total help from my husband. He reads and translates everything for me. He even writes it for me. The last time I went to my OB/GYN was my last encounter with having to write something in English. My husband had to help me with that. As I said before, he even goes into the room with the doctor and me.
>
> –translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

Issues of power within families raise dilemmas for our family support staff. On the one hand, the entire staff has strong feminist commitments and an inclination to use these occasions to raise the consciousness of the women regarding their being controlled by husbands. On the other, the staff have strong commitments to respect other cultures and practices. This issue is raised in another context in the conclusion.

CLAIM THREE. Many of the mothers have the practice of reading to their children as a result of either their own prior experience or from the practices that are promoted in the family support workshops. Their own literacy development may preclude reading in English, so a number of the

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Spanish-speaking mothers read to their children in Spanish.

> I read a lot to my children. I read to them every day. Although there are only a few books that I can read to my children because I could only read to them in Spanish . . . I do this because you guys say [it] is good for them. I have also learned from Project Family that it's very important to read to your kids. I do anything that experts tell me to do because I want to make sure that I am providing my children with everything that they need to develop into smart girls.
>
> --translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

Another mother is more limited by her knowledge of books in Spanish. She said:

> I also read to my children. I read books in English because there aren't a lot of Spanish books available. When I am reading to my children, I don't know what the book says because its in English, however, I pretend that I know how to read and tell a story to my children based on the pictures on the book.
>
> --translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

In contrast, the Laotian mother, whose has developed the ability to read simple materials in English reports this practice:

> I read books when I read to my children. I only read to my children in English because I want them to learn English. I like to read books, but sometimes I don't understand everything on the book because they are in English.
>
> --(Parent literacy interview Jan. 2002, transcribed from tape of hesitantly spoken English.)

It is of interest that each of these three non-English-speaking mothers reports making a serious attempt to support the developing literacy of her children. It is unclear that school staff would recognize these attempts as parental support because they do not fit the expectations of teachers that parents will help their children learn English, as opposed to helping their children develop literacy in Spanish. Whether the responses of the mothers is an attempt to please the interviewer cannot be determined from these data. Other interviews reinforce the interpretation that mothers are reading to their children, whether in Spanish, English, or interpreting pictures to tell a story in Spanish (or some other language). Just how reading in Spanish supports the development of English is not clear. We suspect that the act of reading together supports literacy, regardless of the language. Some research suggests that literacy activity in one language will enhance subsequent literacy development in another language (Ovando, 1998). Of course, reading in Spanish would not help children develop sound recognition of English sounds. So whatever real benefit the children may receive from being in a "literacy rich environment" may not be recognized by their teacher. And parental effort that results in literacy in Spanish is not likely to recognizable by teachers as parental support.

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Another qualification we have to make regarding the support mothers give for the developing literacy of their children is that some mothers in the group have older children who are already in elementary school. Several mothers with older children reported, as in the mother's quote at the beginning of the paper, that they are less able to help their older children. The questions and needs these children have regarding school work are more complex and are likely to require skills beyond being read to. In fact, two of the mothers reported that their older children read to them and younger siblings. Mothers report that the older children sometimes translate for them or correct their speech. Thus, the ability to be supportive when children are younger may give way to more difficult problems as the children move ahead through school.

CLAIM FOUR. Mothers, especially, express the desire and intention to learn English. A number are registered for an ESL class offered through the preschool parent support program. Several of the mothers mentioned their involvement in the ESL class as evidence of their own efforts to learn English.

> Yesterday was our first day of English classes . . so the very last time that I read and wrote something was yesterday. I read, wrote and spoke a few sentences. This was obviously in English. There were only four people from the preschool at the English classes. There were a lot of other people there. It was really nice how they had childcare. Now I think that us mothers do not have an excuse for not learning English. We often say that we can't learn English because we don't have anybody to baby-sit our children, but now there is no excuse. There is childcare available and so if we don't go to the classes it means that we just don't want to learn. I am happy and willing to go all the time. As a matter of fact, I am going with my sister and this other neighbor of mine. I told them that it was a good opportunity for us to learn English.
>
> –translated from Spanish by a bi-lingual interviewer

This mother recognizes both structural and personal factors in developing literacy. Further, she has organized a group to provide mutual support for the development of English literacy. Other mothers may not have participated in ESL classes previously because of the lack of child care or convenient class times. The class at the preschool eliminates these structural barriers. On the other hand, learning a new language as an adult is a stressful and potentially humiliating experience. Though the pay off is recognized by these mothers, they also talk about the stress and hard work. Some are more disciplined in the effort than others. This Laotian mother describes her attempts to learn English:

> I went to school in my country to learn how to read and write in Laotian. I am very good at reading and writing my own language. To learn how to speak, read and write English, I went to school Monday through Friday—I did lots of homework. I used to read the dictionary also. Now the only thing that I do, since I don't go to school any more, is read the dictionary and learn new words. I really want to go back to school soon though.

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--Spoken in broken English to the interviewer.

Both the family support activities associated with the preschool and these mothers' lived experience convince them that they will benefit from learning English. All of them are struggling, in different ways and with different levels of commitment to learn English. They all have a variety of literacy practices that could provide scaffolding for increased literacy development for themselves and their children.

CONCLUSIONS

These families exhibit a wide range of literacy practices. Some of them reflect attempts to develop new levels of practice and abilities. Several of the mothers are engaging in activities to develop their literacy in English. They are enrolled in the ESL class at the preschool. Some have taken other such classes or have begun classes that they had to discontinue because of child care needs. One even takes a class at night, leaving her own two daughters unattended at home. These parents, especially the mothers, are well aware of the costs of limited literacy in English to their mobility, personal power, ability to support their children's developing literacy, and their own employment opportunities. Their responses to the challenges of literacy are both practical and personal. A number of the women who are at home with younger children have felt limited by the lack of child care and classes offered at a convenient time. The class at the preschool offers child care for siblings during the preschool hours enabling parents to take classes.

There is a disincentive to developing literacy. These families are embedded in a community in which they can get most of the services and resources they need. Many public offices have Spanish-speaking personnel. Adults at the preschool are often called on by parents for help in translating documents or writing responses to requests for information. Seeking help from the preschool staff or from neighborhood institutions is a literacy practice that eases the costs of not having literacy in English.

The beliefs and practices of husbands and fathers in this community provide personal barriers to developing literacy in English. Though it is not always articulated as a strategy of control, for some husbands and fathers, having their wives dependent on them for mediating transactions across the contact zone is comfortable and natural. They are accustomed to being in charge and being authorized to speak for their families. Having exclusive access to the language of power reinforces their authority and control. The use of access to the language of power as a lever in personal relations is also a literacy practice that none of the staff want to perpetuate or encourage. This practice well illustrates how literacy practices are embedded in power relations.

We have learned much about the literacy practices of these families in this research. Literacy skills vary greatly both within and among families. Immigrant families represent much greater complexity and face much greater complexity in terms of literacy demands and opportunities than the casual observer could imagine. Parents we interviewed, predominantly mothers, are very aware of and frustrated over the consequences of not having good functional skills in English.

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They understand how they are limited both personally and socially by their lack of knowledge of English. Despite their lack of English skills, some of these mothers work hard to support the developing literacy of their children, reading to them in their native language if they cannot read in English. These efforts to support the developing literacy of their children may not be recognizable by school authorities who tend to gauge literacy by competence in using English. A number of the mothers are working to develop their own English language skills so they can be more independent and more supportive of the developing English language skills of their children.

We need to make the point that some parents have chosen not to participate in any of our data collection or parent support activities, despite our considerable efforts to encourage them to participate. About one third of the parents of the current preschool class have not participated in any of these activities. We can only speculate about how they may differ from the parents who did participate. Like most of those who did participate, they are Spanish-speaking immigrants from Central and South America. We know that several of the mothers who did participate in the family workshops and the ESL class were able to do so because they were at home with younger children. When we provided child care for these children, the mothers were able to come to the workshops. It may be that those who did not participate had no other children and thus could participate in the paid labor force. In contrast, they may have been people who did not want any contact with "authorities" because their immigration status was problematic.

The purpose of this analysis has been to uncover the range of literacy practices among the immigrant families served by a small pre-school in Arlington, Virginia. While our conclusions cannot be generalized to all immigrant families or to other contexts, we do believe they are very important. The importance of the findings is to forestall the stereotyped thinking about immigrants that "they don't try to help their children" or that "they come here and don't try to learn English." Such thinking belies the complexities of the lives of immigrant families. Further, stereotyped thinking about immigrant families ignores the differences among them. Educators sometimes hold simplistic ideas about the motivations of minority and immigrant families. They may fail to recognize heroic efforts of families to support their children in school, learn English themselves, earn a living doing low-wage work, maintain ties to families in their country of origin, etc. To a person, these mothers reported their motivation for coming to the United States was to secure a better life for themselves and their children. Most of them desperately want their children to succeed in school and to prepare themselves for middle-class jobs and careers.

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